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Cold Wars: Black Soldiers in Liberal Hollywood

In 1982 Louis Gossett, Jr was awarded the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of Gunnery Sergeant Foley in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, becoming the first African American actor to win an Oscar since Sidney Poitier. In 1989, Denzel Washington became the second to win, again in a supporting role, for *Glory*. It is perhaps more than coincidental that both award winning roles were soldiers. At once assimilationist and militant, the black soldier apparently escapes the Hollywood history Donald Bogle has named, “Coons, Toms, Bucks, and Mammies” or the more recent litany of cops and criminals. From the liberal consensus of WWII, to the ideological ruptures of Vietnam, and the reconstruction of the image of the military in the Reagan-Bush era, the black soldier has assumed an increasingly prominent role, ironically maintaining Hollywood’s liberal credentials and its preeminence in producing a national mythos. This largely static evolution can be traced from landmark films of WWII and post-War liberal Hollywood: *Bataan* (1943) and *Home of the Brave* (1949), through the career of actor James Edwards in the 1950’s, and to the more politically contested Vietnam War films of the 1980’s.

Since WWII, the black soldier has held a crucial, but little noted, position in the battles over Hollywood representations of African American men.¹ The soldier’s role is conspicuous in the way it places African American men explicitly within a nationalist and a nationalizing context: U.S. history and Hollywood’s narrative of assimilation, the combat film. This placement was, of course, rigorously eschewed by the traditions and institutions of segregation. In 1943 the U.S. Office of War Information conducted a survey of films which featured black

characters (23% of the total output in late '42 and early '43) and concluded, "in general, Negroes are presented as basically different from other people, as taking no relevant part in the life of the nation, as offering nothing, contributing nothing, expecting nothing" (Koppes 179). This difference was of concern to a government which was not only drafting African Americans to serve in rigorously segregated units, but, perhaps more urgently, was mobilizing African American workers in war industries where they were greeted uneasily by white workers. In this context, as Thomas Cripps notes, "the war movies seemed heavensent" (75). In *Bataan*, *Sahara*, *Crash Dive* (all 1943), and *Lifeboat* (1944) black men were self-consciously featured as supporting players in a national and global drama.

The discovery of the black soldier's key part on the national stage during WWII involved a paradox of recognition and repression, remembering and forgetting which would outlive the Jim Crow military. What begins in WWII as a kind of tokenism, the inclusion of a black soldier in the symbolic platoon, becomes, in the 1980's, the grounds on which the war film is recuperated. The war film exemplifies the characteristics Dana Polan sees defining Hollywood films of the 1940's, "a narrativity caught between power and paranoia" (Polan 15). If the power of narrative lies in its ability "to write an image of life as coherent, teleological, univocal," then paranoia is its troubled twin, "the fear of narrative, and the particular social representations it tries to uphold, against all that threatens the unity of its framework" (Polan 12). I want to elaborate Polan's argument by placing race at his juncture of power and paranoia, as that which defines in quite overt ways the boundaries within which Hollywood narrative achieves coherence and univocality and yet is also the site of repression which breeds paranoia.

The ideological coherence of the WWII combat film reflects an unusually literal example of what Louis Althusser called an Ideological State Apparatus in the marriage of the government (civilian and military) and the entertainment industry. The Office of War Information turned to Hollywood not simply to propagate policies and war goals, but to re-imagine everyday American life in relation to the war effort. Racial stratification was one crucial aspect of American life which demanded such revision, resisting both absolute segregation which delimited labor mobility and the war-time demands of groups such as the NAACP who were demanding a double V for Victory, against fascism abroad and racism at home. The genre of the WWII combat

film codified an image and a plot of American identity in which racial difference could be presented without distress. As Polan's narrative analysis suggests, this coherence could only be wrought through dramatic repressions—most basically the repression of a segregated military and white racism. These repressions direct combat narratives at every turn, forming a paranoid other which would itself become a narrative staple of Vietnam War films, media spectacularization of sixties black militancy, and, most especially, blaxploitation films—the resistant black man with a gun.²

The 1943 release *Bataan* established the most critical generic feature of the Hollywood combat film: the symbolic platoon. Set against the less than heroic U.S. withdrawal from the Philippines, the movie introduces, literally through a role call, the assemblage of soldiers, sailors, and marines who are left behind to blow up a bridge and keep it from being rebuilt. Although the men are marked by differences of military service and rank, region and age, the most apparent and characteristic difference is ethnicity and race: Jew, Irish, Pole, Chicano, Filipino, and African American are brought together. This emblematic melting pot marks the film's importance as one of the first produced in cooperation with the Office of War Information. The ideological work set up for the plot is apparent. A series of differences is established in order to be resolved in the gesture of common purpose, marking and motivating the mobilization necessary to a total war effort.

The differences dramatized in the plot, however, are strictly personal and individual. It is by eschewing the dramatization of tensions with overt social, political and ideological implications that *Bataan* is most typical, even prototypical, of the combat film. Ironically, this means that the level of difference most apparent in the establishing scene, the ethnic and racial, remains spoken only through characterization and is not enacted. Plot lines belong exclusively to white characters with no particularized ethnic identities: the pilot, Sergeant Dane, the cynical Todd, the naive sailor Purkett, and the conscientious objector medic. These are the men who have to make choices and whose characters change in the audience's estimation over the course of the film.

This internal drama of identity and unity is played out against a significantly racialized landscape. The Japanese-dominated Philippines constitutes a kind of American racial dreamscape—the grotesque return of the imperial repressed. As Richard Slotkin, notes, “the Japanese advance graphically confirmed the direst fantasies of a ‘Rising Tide of

Color' ” (318-19). The Philippines marked a U.S. military defeat paralleled only by Little Big Horn. *Bataan* enacts this mythology, cloaking its studio sets in an eerie fog which heightens the claustrophobic and surreal qualities of the American last stand. No mention is made in *Bataan* of the history of U.S. forces in the Philippines.³ That history is encoded instead by Yankee Salazar, the Filipino scout who, at a crucial moment, strips off his uniform and in loincloth and body paint sets out to find General MacArthur and a “Fourth of July” spectacle of American power. Salazar is more overtly patriotic than the American Todd who doubts MacArthur’s ability. But his demonstration of patriotic faith also recapitulates the popular American rationale for domination in the Philippines, that the Filipinos were incapable of self-rule and in need of American protection.

Salazar is the Yankee but he is also the Indian, both as a visual icon and in his role as scout. The invocation of this past works to elide the more immediately troublesome past of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and, by placing the Filipino at the liminal point in American identities, draws the black soldier Epps (Kenneth Spenser) firmly within the circle of American identity. Epps becomes the spokesman for faith in the military and by extension the American system, chastising Salazar’s need to seek greater American aid rather than to act as an American, that is on his own authority and power. Spenser literally embodies such power. He is by far the tallest man in the group, and his physical presence is crudely reinforced by posing him shirtless through most of the film.

In a crucial scene, Purkett, the teenage sailor/musician is standing guard at night. In the eerie mist he fires at what he thinks is a “Jap,” only to have it revealed as the dead body of Salazar hanging from a tree, an image which suggests the silent and torturous horrors committed by the unseen Japanese enemy. Although, as John Dower and Richard Slotkin have both demonstrated, anti-Japanese propaganda drew heavily on anti-black racist iconography, here Salazar and the Japanese are figured similarly as part of the landscape which is literally foreign to the G.I.’s, including Epps.⁴ Epps’ difference is diminished in direct relation to the short, stocky Salazar; no one would mistake the towering Kenneth Spenser for the enemy as constructed in the film.

Within this international reinscription of the racial boundaries of American identity, racial difference within the U.S. loses its most volatile points of demarcation. This is most apparent in the careful bal-

ancing of Epps' doubled role as demolitions expert, the one who actually blows up the bridge, and as preacher, the one to eulogize the dead and invoke a higher purpose. By turning Epps' character to God and the spiritual, his role is moved outside the realm of social, political, and historical contingency in which racism operates. This characterization of Epps requires that Jim Crow segregation in the military be forgotten both by the narrative and by the audience. Although an explanation in which Epps had become separated from his unit would be perfectly feasible within the narrative context, the film operates in complete denial by making Epps and Matowski buddies who have served together since before Pearl Harbor.

In a sense the film does its work too well. The image of black and white soldiers fighting side by side is so naturalized that it renders a segregated military illogical. This defiance marks the film's liberal core. Producer Dore Schary claims credit for the inclusion of Epps, acknowledging it "really was inaccurate" but seeing it as a breakthrough opportunity in race relations (Suid 45). The problem is that desegregation remains thinkable in the film only as an inaccurate fiction.⁵ This irony is underwritten by Michael Rogin's observation that "the grip of the good war [on American culture] has importantly to do with how it seemed at once to justify demonology and to free American politics from the stigma of race" (110). In defeating Japan, and especially Nazi Germany, expansionist powers with explicitly racist ideologies, the United States was able for the first time to effectively suppress its own ideology and history of racism, even as it demonized the enemy through highly familiar codes.

The liberal gesture of the black soldier's inclusion in the symbolic platoon of *Bataan* found new and higher stakes in the move for adult audiences in the post-war era. As Thomas Cripps has convincingly demonstrated, the ideology of common purpose and brotherhood which enabled a positive imaging of racial difference in WWII films developed in the postwar era into the most self-consciously liberal of Hollywood genres, the message or social problem picture (215-249). Released in 1949, *Home of the Brave* clearly reflects these generic and ideological imperatives. Self-consciously promoting *Home* as the first postwar picture to deal with the "race problem," producer Stanley Kramer went so far as to hide the subject of the film during production in order to beat the passing film *Pinky*, being made at the same time, into release. *Home of the Brave* tells the story of a small army surveying unit which is

sent to map enemy encampments on a Pacific island near the end of WWII. The white unit is assigned a black surveyor, Corporal Moss (James Edwards), as the only available qualified soldier. In the unit Moss is reunited with his high school buddy, Finch (Lloyd Bridges), encounters overt racism from a private and, initially, resistance from the young Major in charge. The film is framed by Moss's psychiatric treatment for paralysis and amnesia following Finch's death.

Home of the Brave is both a film about repression and itself an example of repression. *Home* narrates this encounter across the color line from the hyper-individualized and internalized perspective of a doctor/patient relationship. In the film's dramatic denouement, the psychiatrist badgers Moss into admitting that he felt good when Finch was shot. But the crucial question becomes one of motivation. Moss believes he was feeling retribution; that he was glad Finch died because he was "going to call me a yellow bellied nigger." "No" the doctor exclaims, striking the bed with his fist, "that's the problem, that sensitivity of yours." Circling him the doctor commands Moss's attention: "I want you to listen to me, harder than you've ever listened to anyone in your life." The lesson is that Moss is "no different," that "all soldiers" feel good when a buddy is shot instead of them. The point here is fairly obvious. First of all, Moss, not white racism, is the problem, the bearer of the disease and the mark of difference—"that sensitivity of yours." Commanding the camera with his movement, which literally looks down on the immobilized black soldier, the doctor seeks to cure the paralyzed Moss by appropriating his point of view, retelling his story back to him and deracializing it.

This disavowal of racism ironically counters Kramer's positioning of the film as the first postwar film to deal with the race problem. But the flashback structure in many ways focuses the film's telling desire to both name white racism and to repress it. First, and most obviously, it puts racism in the past. The two white characters most guilty of racism are in fact the film's first narrators who tell their story to the doctor in order to aid in Moss's recovery. Their narration of their own racism becomes evidence of their conversion. There are, however, significant lapses in narrative logic within this framing. The Major denies knowing anything about the private's attack on Finch on the island, and at the end of the film the private enacts the very kinds of racist assumptions that are criticized in the flashback he ostensibly narrates. Both men are forced to deny knowing things about racism that they have to know in order to tell the story.

These ruptures are contained by two organizing narrative structures. First is the very convention of the Hollywood flashback. "Think back," the doctor tells Moss and we are visually sent back in time to the island. Although framed by character narrations which would suggest subjective points of view, the camera makes the past a place that can be visited, empirically stable and knowable. The single point of contested interpretation becomes not what happened but a word unspoken by a dead man, either "nigger" or "nit-wit." Within the film's narrative, the psychiatrist is the only audience for these various narrations and, as an army doctor, he uses his dual authority to both institutionalize and individualize a proper narrative. The use of newsreel footage within these individually framed flashbacks aids both the naturalizing gesture of classic Hollywood style and the doctor's appropriation of Moss' memory to reconstruct a universal masculine narrative which is presented as the cure for Moss's debilitating difference.⁶ The film prefigures Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1963 advocacy of the "utterly masculine world" of the military as a cure for the "disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age" (Baskir 125). As in the symbolic platoon of WWII combat films, the whole purpose of difference is to subsume it. In *Home of the Brave*, racism is literally an isolated problem, the internalized disease of the only black person in the film, and he is cured at film's end.

Home of the Brave is not wholly as pathetic as its denouement. James Edwards' performance was widely praised in the black and white press as breaking stereotype. Edwards' career is a powerful gauge of the new and severely limited opportunities afforded African Americans in Hollywood following WWII. Having served as a first lieutenant in WWII, Edwards went on to play G.I.'s in *The Steel Helmet* (1951), *Bright Victory* (1951), *Battle Hymn* (1957), *Men in War* (1957), *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Again and again, Edwards played a soldier or veteran, a role which insisted on his heroic manhood even as it refused to allow it any active narrative employment. In essence, Edwards was given a gun and not allowed to use it. Only Samuel Fuller's iconoclastic Korean War film, *The Steel Helmet*, allows Edwards' character to be defined by a bitterly ironic acknowledgment of his doubly embattled space, simultaneously fighting American racism and the communist enemy with wit and grace. In *Bright Victory* Edwards plays a blind veteran who befriends another blind and bigoted white G.I. As in *Home of the Brave*, the use of the hospital suggests the

diagnosis of racism as an illness, but, as in the later Sidney Poitier film, *A Patch of Blue* (1965), blindness becomes the metaphor for the noble possibilities of a colorblind society.

As Michele Wallace argues, “In the aftermath of the Jewish Holocaust, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Japanese internment, and in the early stages of the McCarthy era and the Cold War, the particular political environment of the late forties made the range of safe discussions of [race and racism] a narrow one” (268). This narrowness continued well into the fifties, but it was complicated by the need to acknowledge the desegregation of the armed forces. When President Truman signed the 1948 Executive Order instituting “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin,” he acted out of a complex set of domestic and national security considerations, pressed both by the work of African American civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph and the growing acknowledgement that segregation was a liability in the international propaganda battles of the Cold War. In Truman’s colorful terms, “The top dog in a world which is 90% colored ought to clean his own house” (Sherry 146). Hollywood’s WWII practice of not mentioning the typically cameo presence of the black soldier neatly reflected the need to show a new, desegregated America without confronting the history of segregation and discrimination.

The Korean War forced the new policy of desegregation into practice.⁷ *Pork Chop Hill*, one of the most epic and earnest Hollywood representations of the Korean War, demonstrates the barely contained tension between the WWII practice of the symbolic, but un-narrated inclusion of the black soldier, and the increasing degree to which the story of the black soldier was the story of the war. *Pork Chop Hill* never names race or racism directly, but in the doubling of James Edwards and Woody Strode it implicitly addresses the controversy over desegregation in the military. Edwards, the corporal, is the consummate good soldier, who commands the recalcitrant men to get on with the job, calling white men “boy” without eliciting resentment. The film tells the story of a bloody battle, perhaps the last before the immanent announcement of an armistice. Exacerbating the futility of fighting a war being decided in negotiation are the appeals of an eloquent Chinese Communist propagandist broadcasting over the battlefield. Many, even most of the men complain, try to get rotated out of the unit before the battle, and even move toward open subordination if not mutiny by telling their

commander, played by Gregory Peck, that they should turn back because the hill is not worth dying for. But when the propagandist announces, "Men of King Company, you know this isn't your fight," his voice plays over the image of Woody Strode, who, in apparent response, throws himself on the ground and claims a sprained ankle.

Peck literally pulls Strode back into the battle, but when Strode takes refuge behind a stump after seeing a G.I. killed, Peck threatens him with ten years in Leavenworth. The charge of cowardice remains unspoken and is, in any case, an oversimplification of Strode's sullen relationship to battle. James Edwards is ordered to "keep an eye on" Strode, a charge both official and personally felt. "I've got a special interest in everything you do," he tells Strode. The two black soldiers fill a medium shot, staring each other down. At the center of the shot Edwards' hand grips Strode's wrist just below a clenched fist. The shot is striking in the way it anticipates the overlapping iconography of the Vietnam War and Black Power. Here, however, the gaze of one black soldier into the eyes of another is not that of brothers, but of antagonists, of the good soldier and the coward. Woody Strode is what James Edwards has to overcome to enter fully into the military corps, his quite literally paranoid other. Through Strode the film surreptitiously invokes the racist attacks on African American courage and loyalty which had so long been used to uphold segregation in the military. As in *Home of the Brave*, however, the antagonism exists not within white, national imagination, but within and between black men.

Oddly though, Edwards drops out of the film. We see him neither killed nor wounded, but he is not among the two dozen survivors. Woody Strode, on the other hand, is crucial in the enactment of the last stand. He energetically throws himself into the work of defending the bunker. Like Kenneth Spenser in *Bataan*, Strode is a dominating physical presence whose commitment establishes American security in a hostile world. In return for Strode's labor, Peck offers him a cliché of inclusion which reverberates perversely against the Civil Rights battles contemporary to the film's release—"Welcome to the club." The film plots Strode's cowardly doubt, his lack of faith in home and war, country and platoon, if ostensibly only to overturn them, in a way that it cannot seem to plot Edwards' professionalism which simply exists beyond question. In a terrible but telling turn of irony, Edwards' last movie role was as the General's valet in *Patton* (1970).

If *Pork Chop Hill* is exemplary of Hollywood's interest in serious,

realistic films in the 1950's, *The Manchurian Candidate* is its paranoid twin; a dark, perverse, subjective film about unconscious actions and desires. As in the other films, Edwards' race is never mentioned. The film offers by far the most pointed image of Edwards as no different from the other men in his unit. *The Manchurian Candidate* opens in a Korean brothel, where soldiers, including Edwards, are shown drinking and lounging with half-dressed women. Edwards is the only black soldier in the unit, but the camera in no way distinguishes his presence or his relationship to the other soldiers or the women. The entrance of the martinet, whistle-blowing Laurence Harvey further binds Edwards' image to that of the other men. The spectacle of miscegenation, the most inflammatory image of desegregation, is pointedly invoked, but as with *Bataan* the internationalizing of race and ideology in the film works to draw the black soldier within the circle of American manhood. The Korean prostitutes exist literally outside the black and white iconography of American segregation and the Orientalized communists are the film's ultimate un-American other.

Edwards is so like the film's hero, Frank Sinatra, that they share the same dreams. These dreams of a meeting of a ladies garden club in a hotel are themselves "plants," the falsified memories of communist brainwashing. But they carry a fascinatingly American aspect: Sinatra's ladies are white, Edwards' are black. The women share identical clothing, manners, and presentations. Both white and black garden clubs are convincing "slices" of American life. But unlike the lone black soldier of the symbolic platoon, these parallel domestic dreams testify to the very segregation which Edwards' relation to Sinatra and the other men denies. In terms of the film's convoluted plot, Edwards is the link between Sinatra and Harvey, the planted assassin, after the war. Like Sinatra, he is driven to seek out Harvey, writing a letter which is the first evidence that Sinatra's obsessions are not individual. It is Edwards' testimony to the government which makes Sinatra's nightmares credible when both men identify the same Soviet agents.

Edwards thus becomes the link between the heroic and perverse images of a wounded Cold War masculinity. This is why the brothel scene, and the later one in which Edwards awakens from a nightmare and is shown in bed with his wife are so significant. In the struggle against Communist subversion, more than the strong body of the black soldier is needed. Black men must come home from war without the peculiar, racially defined stigma of paralysis, doubt, and lack which *Home*

of the Brave had to create in order to control. Edwards is as virile and as tortured as Sinatra—at least in the diminished but parallel capacity of a supporting player to the star. The subversive threat of communism, as many commentators on the film have noted, is figured as primarily sexual. Harvey’s perversion as a communist-controlled assassin is figured through the codes of fifties homosexuality. He fails utterly as an American man, dominated by a corrupt over-bearing mother. Edwards offers the crucial support to Sinatra’s struggle to combat the subversive evil within, implicitly affirming new resources for heroic, American masculinity. Once again the corporal, Edwards stands for “the men” of the patrol in a way that the officer Sinatra cannot. In both the brothel scene and in a photo displayed in Edwards’ apartment he is pictured at the exact center of the unit, surrounded and embraced by the other men. The racial implications of this manly struggle once again go unsaid, but in a film about dreams, repression, brain-washing and false consciousness, the unsaid is granted far greater power than in films committed to principles of realism. Read side by side, *Pork Chop Hill* and *The Manchurian Candidate* suggest the depth of the need for the good black soldier’s supporting role in the national drama of wars hot and cold, material and psychological.

The concerns of the early years of desegregation in the armed forces which shaped the possibilities and limitations of James Edwards’ career were utterly transformed by the Vietnam War. In a few short years, from 1965 to 1968, the good news story of a successfully desegregated army in the field were overshadowed by charges of disproportionate casualties and the competing ideology of black nationalism. The Vietnam films of the 1980’s rely heavily on the invocation of black nationalism. But once again its representation is iconic not dynamic, suggestive of the cultural landscape of the war rather than the fraught critical connections between African Americans’ struggle for Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) is the most telling in this regard. For the first time a significant number of black soldiers are featured within the platoon. Gestures of collectivity, however, are insistently interracial. Black soldiers, and perhaps even more importantly, the unnamed cultural sign of blackness, is crucial to the film’s claim to realism. But the particular claims and critiques of black nationalism are carefully and coercively controlled. Only one character, the suggestively named “Junior” (Reggie Johnson), explicitly voices the black nationalist position. As many commentators have pointed out, the courage of the

militant stance is undercut by Junior's gross cowardice in the face of battle. Even more telling is Junior's isolation from the other black soldiers. His "free your mind your ass will follow" speech about drugs as the white man's plot is delivered to a white soldier while surrounded by other white soldiers as country music plays in the background. Clyde Taylor has described the black characters in *Platoon* as "shadows" who double and reflect the white characters at center stage (8). Because these black shadows never confront each other, reference can be made to black radicalism without having to engage the implications of its critique.

The good black soldier, again suggestively, even cynically, named, is King (Keith David). King's primary role is as mentor to the film's white protagonist, Chris (Charlie Sheen). As Clyde Taylor has wittily pointed out, the relationship trades on the old cultural model of Huck and Jim—"Come back to the foxhole, Chuck, Honey" (8). Taylor notes that King doubles Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe): "Where Elias's affirmation is an activist, apocalyptic salvationism, King's is a brotherly accomodationism" (8). This reading places King firmly within the liberal tradition. Although Oliver Stone was vociferously condemned as a "Hollywood liberal" by the conservative press of the Reagan/Bush years, his bellicose film style owes less to the imaging of a society rising above color, than the politics of the hipster articulated by Norman Mailer. King's difference from Elias is the difference between life and death in the peculiarly racialized sense Richard Dyer describes in his influential essay, "White": "the idea that non-whites are more natural than whites also comes to suggest that they have more 'life,' a logically meaningless but commonsensically powerful notion" (55). After recovering from a minor wound, Chris returns to the unit where King greets him with the wrist grip handshake of the dap, the black to black salute of the Vietnam War (Flowers 110). He is reborn in his initiation by King into the underground world of the "heads," where black and white soldiers dance in each other arms to the Motown sound of "Tracks of My Tears." Segregation dies not in the liberal dream of James Edwards' professionalism telling its own story of accomplishment, but when the white middle class son is welcomed into "the cool world."

The Vietnam War combat film which most powerfully places black soldiers at its dramatic core is the one usually considered the most politically conservative, *Hamburger Hill* (1987). Much more so than *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill* is an ensemble piece which is constructed crucially around an image and practice of black solidarity out of which

interracial bonds can be earned. At the core of this black solidarity is the medic Doc, played with breathtaking intensity and intelligence by Courtney Vance. Doc, McDaniels, and Motown are introduced together, singing the Motown sound to each other. As in *Platoon*, music plays a crucial role in defining the cultural codes of the war, but here the racial politics of identification are foregrounded. Country Western is not simply the anthem of evil, violent rednecks, nor Motown the sound of a generation of peace loving freaks beyond color. Motown is black music and the Southern accented Platoon Sergeant complains they never play Tammy Wynette on Armed Forces Radio.

This admission of cultural difference translates in an unprecedented way into the articulation of political consequence. Doc, McDaniels, and Motown's song is interrupted when they meet their squad leader (Dylan McDermott) just returned from medical leave. The white man is obviously a friend, but their friendship does not disallow an acknowledgment of racist practices in military. From a joking plea for more brothers to aid them in the music wars, McDaniels makes a more serious request to be transferred to the rear. With less than three weeks on his tour, he's "too short" to go back into the deadly A Shau Valley. "They don't take niggers back at headquarters," Doc tells McDaniels as the sergeant says nothing, "all the white motherfuckers are back there." Doc's delivery is, as always, painfully ironic. It is an old and fundamentally true joke, even if "*all* the white motherfuckers" are obviously not back at HQ. This truth is upheld in the following scene in which Doc's instruction of the New Guys in proper oral hygiene, literally brushing their teeth, is paralleled in the sergeant's instruction in surviving battle. Doc's speech is informed by both technical military instruction and experience. Doc is clearly as knowing as the sergeant, and as played by Vance, demonstrates a far greater brilliance and charisma. He is the truest leader in the unit, but the marked limitations of his role, the circumscribed circle of his command here resonates much farther than the plot limitations imposed again and again on James Edwards. Doc's irony speaks reflexively back to the social and political circumstances which shape his position in the military hierarchy.

Uniquely among Vietnam War films, *Hamburger Hill* actively plots the narratives of both black solidarity and interracial foxhole brotherhood. Whereas in *Platoon* the dap serves as a sleight-of-hand in which black nationalism is both invoked and dispelled, in *Hamburger Hill* the double possibilities of the dap are far more fully imagined. The

crucial scene of the dap comes between Motown and Doc following McDaniels' all too predictable death in battle. "It don't mean nothing," Motown reminds Doc with an irony devoid of humor. Again and again they perform the fist-clenched, elaborate handshake of the dap, until the one black new guy joins in, rebuilding the solidarity threatened by war's violence. Throughout the film Doc returns to his articulate critique of the black man's position in the war, drunk and sober, with varying degrees of humor and bitterness. At a key moment, a white soldier, Beleski, challenges Doc's presumption that racism landed him in Vietnam. "What did they do," Beleski asks, "pull the fucking gold spoon out of my mouth to send me over here?" Doc walks up to him and a fight seems imminent. Instead Doc offers him the clenched fist of the dap; "brother blood," he greets with a laugh. Unlike the interracial bonds of *Platoon*, Doc is not so much offering to overcome racial difference, but to admit class as legitimate site of contest in the war. Yet, concerns about class inequity involving the draft and service in the war more generally can seemingly only be named through race; Doc can and does protest, Beleski can do so only in response to Doc. The black soldier comes to stand for the broad injustice of the Vietnam era draft, invoking but also to a degree disguising what James Fallows called in 1975 the nagging question, "What did you do in the class war, Daddy"?⁸

When Doc dies he seems to give up his insistence on the difference racism makes. "We're all dirty niggers on this hill," he declares before dying in the arms of Motown and the white sergeant, a statement visually enforced as the soldiers become indistinguishable in the muddy slop of the battlefield. Doc's dying gesture of interracial solidarity is sustained by the same assumptions which define the film's political conservatism. Throughout the film, the U.S. is presented as overtaken by antiwar protesters who spit on returning G.I.'s. There is no home. These antiwar protestors, however, are exclusively identified as long-haired college kids and liberal politicians. The turn against the war by Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael and other black leaders is elided entirely. Protesting the war is a privileged position, enjoyed by neither black nor white grunts. Doc's passionate condemnation of the racism inherent in authoritative structures of political power, is ultimately deflected, if not to the fringes of society, at least to an oppositional, not central, position.

The film which most powerfully "integrates" the black soldier into the form and message of the military film is without question *An Officer and*

a Gentleman. Crucially, Sergeant Foley's "blackness" is never named in the film and the story is often told, and held as powerfully significant, that the role of Foley was not written for a black man. Lou Gossett's performance is frequently cited as one which "rises above" or "escapes" racial categories and designations. Gossett was quoted following the Academy Awards ceremony as telling other black actors "Don't just look for black roles. Just look for good roles" (Wiley 626). This language suggests that the measure of Gossett's success, perhaps even its award-winning quality, is as a black actor playing, if not a white role, a not-necessarily-black one. In short Gossett, but not Foley, is read as black.

But the conclusion drawn from this story is usually held to be that the film is not "about" race, and, thus, that race does not figure significantly in the film's meaning. Quite to the contrary, the film's success, both ideologically and at box office, depends very heavily on the unnamed sign of Foley's, and not just Gossett's, blackness. The film ranked second only to *ET* in earnings for 1982, but the cultural work performed by the film was even more powerful: nothing less than the rehabilitation of the military's image as a cultural institution following the degraded representations of the Vietnam War. *An Officer and a Gentleman* returns to the motifs of World War II films, where the military builds gentlemen endowed with self-respect, self-reliance, esprit de corps, and pride, regardless of race, class, or (in the 1980's) even gender.

In order to accomplish this project, the film must banish the specter of Vietnam and Foley is the agent of this exorcism. As the recruits line up for the ritual inspection by their Sergeant, Foley commands their attention through insult, and while the process will lead to the familiar doubting of the men's heterosexuality and thus masculinity, he begins by doubting their Americanness. "You've been badmouthing your government," he accuses, and ridicules them for "being afraid to drop napalm on women and children." Early in training the unit runs to a marching song about a woman burned by napalm. The woman recruit half protests, "that's disgusting," but she laughs and keeps on running. The film seems to assume that the audience will likewise first respond with disgust, and depends upon the unspoken appeal of Foley's race (and of the woman's own place in the frame) to carry viewers beyond it. The black man becomes the model for the recreation of white men whose masculinity has been compromised by "long hair and bad-mouthing their government," in short by the 1960's. Vietnam is named and the Civil

Rights and Black Power movements are not. But race is what is most dynamically played out in the relationship between Foley and the recruits, effectively sidestepping any questions regarding the war in Vietnam or the place of the military in American society. The military is good because Foley is its spokesman, implicitly testifying to principles of integration and equal opportunity, and to a non-convulsive image of historical change, what George Will has called the “military meritocracy.” That there is one black recruit simply allows the fiction of color-blindness its flawless appeal, much as the woman recruit helps create an apparently contemporary setting for the film’s old-fashioned plot about working-class girls husband-hunting among the officer candidates. In representing the military a noble social institution, the film aesthetically reinvents World War II films. Richard Gere resembles no one so much as John Garfield, the sullen kid from the wrong side of the tracks who rises to the challenge, as in *Air Force* (1943).⁹ Most reviewers had the same basic response to the film—they don’t make movies like this anymore. While some critics celebrated this nostalgic return and others condemned it, none recognized the black soldier’s crucial role in the film’s newly old-fashioned story, even as they celebrated Gossett’s performance.

Louis Gossett Jr.’s Gunnery Sergeant marks a significant promotion over James Edwards’ corporal. The sergeant’s role, in turn, has been superceded by a generation of black actors featured in starring roles as officers, encouraged no doubt by the enormous popularity of Colin Powell. Denzel Washington’s performances in *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *Crimson Tide* (1995) are exemplary of an astonishingly wide range of films. Yet, across the demands of mobilization and demobilization, from WWII through the end of the Cold War, from segregation through desegregation, the black soldier’s supporting role has fulfilled an oddly consistent need in imagining the nation. The history of this representation, its brave promises and disappointing limitations, continues to silently suggest the complexity of African Americans’ role in affirming and questioning national narratives without ever allowing the black soldier to voice his (let alone her)¹⁰ own story.

Notes

1. Thomas Cripps' *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to Civil Rights* is a significant exception. Thomas Doherty's *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II* and Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* also include considerable attention to the political controversies surrounding the representations of African Americans in the context of the war effort. There is no comparable sustained attention, however, to the role of the black soldier in contemporary film. For example, Ed Guerrero's rich study, *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film*, offers an insightful study of the place of race in the militarized vision of masculinity in post-*Star Wars* American film, but makes no mention of the figure of the black soldier.

2. In his publicity tour for *Bloods: An Oral History by Black Veterans of the Vietnam War*, Wallace Terry discussed his efforts to sell his manuscript on black soldiers in Vietnam. Terry was sure that the manuscript would be snapped up, posed as it was at the juncture of "the two biggest stories" of his generation, Vietnam and Civil Rights. After dozens of rejections he came to the conclusion that he had a story no one in America wanted to hear: he was "talking about black men with guns." The oral histories were suggested by an editor at Ballantine Books as an alternative to Terry's manuscript about the radicalization of black soldiers in country after 1969.

3. A later film, *Back to Bataan* (1945), would try to narrate the Philippine resistance to U.S. imperialism in order to enlist it in the battle against Japan. This move collapses in comic absurdity when Anthony Quinn, as the grandson of an Auginaldo-like Philippine leader turns to the American military commander, John Wayne, and says, "I know you're a better Filipino than I am."

4. See John Dower 147-180; also Slotkin, 319-320.

5. Desi Arnaz's character, Ramirez, operates in a related way. Ramirez is in love with California and the big band sound. Although carefully avoiding any reference to the *pachuco* culture of Chicano youth in wartime California, as the "jitterbug kid," Ramirez seems consciously designed to reverse the hysterical media inscriptions of the "Zoot Suit Riots" which would erupt in Los Angeles between sailors and Chicano youth within a week of the film's opening. Ramirez denies this strife, testifying instead to the inclusive appeal of American culture. "That's good old America," he crows in response to the radio. The mechanic who has "built his own jalopy back home," Ramirez reverses the studied impracticality of the low rider in Chicano culture and emerges as an American tinker, one who works for the common purpose in spite of sickness and fatigue until overcome by malaria. Unlike the Los Angeles youths persecuted by sailors, police, the newspapers, and courts alike, when Ramirez "jitterbugs himself to death," it is within the circle of an American culture which is presented as understanding and valuing the

Spanish language and Catholicism. The film seems to be making a plea for acceptance of Chicano culture, only to demonstrate that such a gesture is unnecessary.

6. Michele Wallace makes a similar point: "The institutionalization in the forties of a psychoanalytic/psychiatric discourse in the US was central to the formation of conventional notions of masculinity, sexual difference, family, and personality in dominant discourse" (268).

7. See Nalty 255-269.

8. For a careful reading of the significance of race and class in the Vietnam-era draft and military service, see Christian Appy.

9. As a Jew and in his open commitment to leftist political causes, including the unionization of the film industry, Garfield carried in many ways a heavier burden in relation to the assimilation narrative that Gere does. But as with the role of the black soldier, the relationship between Garfield and Gere can be read in nearly opposite ways: either Gere "whitewashes" Garfield and his place in Hollywood history or Garfield's history can be brought to bear on nostalgic readings of films such as *An Officer and a Gentleman*, complicating interpretations of what is being remembered and forgotten, particularly in relation to class and ethnicity. It would be further worth comparing *An Officer and a Gentleman* to Garfield's *Body and Soul* (1947). Gossett is less of a "sidekick" than Canada Lee plays in *Body and Soul*, but the basic structure of the black man physically and morally "training" the white man (including a scene in a boxing ring) is continued in *Officer*. For more on Garfield see Robert Sklar, *City Boys*.

10. John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996), an independent film significantly at the margins of Hollywood distribution, is the only film I know to feature supporting yet significant roles in which black women are soldiers.

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